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CHAIM I. WAXMAN

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, NJ, USA

Jewish Education Does Matter

As the title of my paper suggests, the available evidence strongly indicates that Jewish education plays a significant role in Jewish identity and identification. The evidence which I will present is from my recent book, Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective (Waxman, 2001), and is based primarily on data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). NJPS is a sample survey of American Jews sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations. The first one was undertaken in 1971, and the next in 1990. The 2000-01 survey is now being completed. I selected those who, when asked their current religion, identified themselves as Jewish. The specific data are for the age group known as "baby boomers," that is, those who were born and grew up between 1946-1964. That cohort represented, in 1990, a third of the American population. I compared that group with baby boomers of other religious and ethnic groups, and I compared the Jewish baby boomers with their elders, those whom I called the "pre-WWII cohort." What I will now present are the findings with respect to Jewish education and other manifestations of Jewish

religiosity and ethnicity.

At first glance, it might appear as if the rate of Jewish education among baby boomers is very high. The vast majority (78.0%) stated that they had four or more years of formal Jewish education. For those who were raised with a denominational affiliation other than Reform, the rates are even higher.

Table 1: Years of Formal Jewish Education, JBB

	Males	Females	All
0-3 years	18.4	26.0	22.0
4-8 years	53.2	39.9	47.0
9-12 years	22.6	27.8	25.0
More than 12 years	5.8	6.3	6.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

It comes as no surprise that the extent of Jewish education varies denominationally. Among those who were raised as Reform, 79% said they had four or more years; 82% of the Conservatives had four or more years; and almost 90% of the Orthodox reported that they had at least four years of Jewish education. However, there are different types of formal Jewish education with varying degrees of intensity, ranging from Sunday schools, the least intensive, to day schools, the most intensive. When we look at the type as well, it becomes even more apparent that American Jewish baby boomers have actually had very low levels of intense, formal Jewish education. As the

following table indicates, close to 40 percent of the male baby boomers (38.3%) and two-thirds of the females (66.2%) have had less than 4-8 years of supplementary Jewish education, and only eight percent of the males and 5.3% of the females had more than eight years of day school education.

Table 2: Years of Formal Jewish Education, JBB, by Denomination

	Current Denomination				
	Ortho-dox	Conser-vative	Reform	Recon struc-tionist	Other/ none
0-3 years	15.3	18.0	22.0	10.5	33.2
4-8 years	13.8	49.5	50.5	71.3	41.4
9-12 years	21.0	27.9	24.6	11.9	24.0
12+ years	49.9	4.6	2.9	6.3	1.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Denomination Raised				
0-3 years	10.5	18.1	20.8	-	47.7
4-8 years	42.3	55.9	46.4	84.7	25.4
9-12 years	26.1	20.5	31.0	15.3	21.2
12+ years	21.0	5.5	1.8	-	5.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3: Amount and Type of Jewish Education Respondent Received, by Gender

	Male	Female	All
None	10.7	33.0	22.7
Less than 4 years of Jewish Education	12.3	12.9	12.6
Sunday School, 4-8 years	8.9	10.5	9.8
Sunday School, More than 8 years	6.4	9.8	8.2
Supplementary School, 4-8 years	34.8	13.6	23.4
Day School, 4-8 years	3.4	1.3	2.3
Supplementary School, More than 8 years	15.4	13.6	14.4
Day School, More than 8 years	8.0	5.3	6.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

These findings should also be viewed in light of various studies which have raised serious questions about the long-term impact of supplementary Jewish education (Himmelfarb, 1974, 1975; Board of Jewish Education, 1988; Fishman & Goldstein, 1993). These studies are consistent with the findings of Andrew Greeley and Peter Rossi about the impact of Catholic education, namely, that it was effective for those whose families were very religious, but was of negligible impact for those who were not (Greeley & Rossi, 1966). Although some research (Cohen, 1988; Resnick, 1992; Schiff, 1992) has found that even less intensive supplementary Jewish education has some impact and, therefore, is not "for naught," as

Himmelfarb and others suggest, there still remains the question of its impact on the Jewish identification of its adult alumni. That is, the impact of supplementary Jewish education on adult Jewish identification remains unsubstantiated.

When we compare the extent of the baby boomers' Jewish education with that of the pre-WWII cohort, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, a slightly higher percentage replied that they received no formal Jewish education, from 19.8% among the pre-WWII cohort to 22.4% among the baby boomers. On the other hand, among those who have received some formal Jewish education, there have been small increases in its extent.

Table 4: Years of Formal Jewish Education, Pre-WWII

	Males	Females	All
0-3 years	22.6	30.0	26.0
4-8 years	53.9	46.4	50.5
9-12 years	17.4	19.9	18.5
More than 12 years	6.0	3.7	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Looking at the findings in Table 4 with those in Table 1, we notice that four percent less of the baby boomers reported between zero and three years than did those in the pre-WWII cohort. Perhaps more significantly, there is an increase of nine percent in the percentage of baby boomers reporting nine or more

years of Jewish education. Although there are probably a variety of reasons for this latter increase, some emanating from a desire to intensify Jewish identity and others from a desire to shield children from tumultuous public schools, the evidence suggests that the increases in Jewish education will impact on Jewish identity. That, however, also assumes that the increases in years of formal Jewish education are matched by increases in intensity as well. Whether the suggested increases are sufficient to offset the forces eroding Jewish identity remains to be seen.

Previous research into the denomination of day school students has indicated that the overwhelming majority are Orthodox. This is apparently due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of day schools are Orthodox. In non-Orthodox day schools, the percentage of Orthodox is much smaller. Thus, Schiff and Schneider, in their survey of day school alumni, reported that

> About three quarters of parents of alumni of Conservative schools are described as Conservative by their children; 12 percent as Orthodox; and 12 percent as Reform or [Reconstructionist]. About 70 percent of the parents of those who attended Orthodox schools are described as Orthodox; 25 percent as Conservative; and 5 percent as Reform or Reconstructionist. Sixty three percent of trans-ideological school alumni describe their parents as Conservative; 25 percent as Orthodox; and 9 percent as Reform or Reconstructionist.
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> (Schiff & Schneider, p. 11)

And, a 1994 study by the Avi Chai Foundation which analyzed the self-identified denominational affiliation

of day schools in the United States found that, of a total of 221 schools surveyed in New York State, 204 were Orthodox, 11 Solomon Schechter, five Community schools and one Reform. In the rest of the country, a total of 280 schools were surveyed: 170 were Orthodox, 55 Community, 43 Solomon Schechter and 12 Reform (Avi Chai, 1994, p. 4). Thus, in New York, the Orthodox schools represented 92% of the total number of day schools, but the picture is very different outside of New York. There, although Orthodox schools are still a majority, they represent only 60% of the total. Since these figures point to an important, previously-mentioned difference between New York and the rest of the country, social scientists and Jewish communal workers must be cognizant of these differences and not assume characteristics for one based on evidence of the other.

Analysis of the NJPS data on baby boomers indicates that day school education correlates with almost all measures of Jewish identity and identification, and for many of those measures, the correlation is much higher than it is with other types of Jewish education. Thus, for example, among those who have 4-8 years of Jewish education, almost 30% (28.9%) of those who were in day schools report that their households always keep separate meat and dairy dishes, as compared to 9% of those who had that amount of supplementary school education. Moreover, those with more than eight years of day school education were more than three times as likely to report that their households always keep separate meat and dairy dishes than were those who had more than eight years of supplementary education. Among those in days schools, more than half, 54.2% kept

separate dishes, compared to 15.7% among those who had supplementary Jewish education.

Indeed, the empirical evidence supports the strong, positive role played by day school education with respect to the intermarriage rate as well as to *aliya*, the rate of immigration to Israel. Thus, among married Jewish baby boomers who were raised Orthodox and had 12 or more years of day school education, there is no statistical evidence of intermarriage. All of those respondents identified their spouse's current religion as Jewish. Much more surprising, they all reported that their spouses were born Jewish. In terms of American Jewry as a whole, 12 or more years of day school education is without question anomalous, but within the contemporary American Orthodox community it is increasingly the norm.

When the intermarriage rate is examined denominationally, it is obvious that all denominations are characterized by some intermarriage. However, the rates are higher among the baby boomers than among the pre-WWII cohort. Although the difference between the rates in the two groups is least for the Orthodox, they too experience a higher rate of intermarriage among their baby boomers.

Table 5: Intermarriage Rates in the Major Jewish Denominations

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Orthodox	15.8	14.4
Conservative	44.0	17.8
Reform	52.3	34.0

As indicated, there appears to be an increasing pattern among the Orthodox of having at least 12 years of day school education. Half of the Orthodox baby boomers (49.9%) reported having more than 12 years of day school Jewish education, as compared to less than a quarter (23.9%) of the pre-WWII cohort who so reported. Among Conservative respondents, there was a decrease from 5.3% among the pre-WWII cohort to 4.6% among the baby boomers reporting more than 12 years of day school education, and among Reform it was 3% for both cohorts. Given the increasing percentage of Orthodox having 12 or more years of day school education and the indications that the intermarriage rate decreases as the number of years of day school education increases, we may anticipate a decrease in their intermarriage rate, if that relation continues to hold.

However, as has been indicated several times in this work, the Orthodox are a relatively small minority of the American Jewish baby boomer population. Moreover, Orthodoxy does not have any significant magnetic attraction to the bulk of American Jewry; and, in any case, even though there probably has been a decrease in the rate of those leaving Orthodoxy, the numbers leaving are still greater than those entering it.

For the community-at-large, the concern expressed by communal leaders with the issue of intermarriage appears to have very real substance. The evidence indicates that in the families of the intermarried, that is, where there is mixed marriage, which is the overwhelming majority of Jewish intermarriages today, Jewish identity is qualitatively different than in families where there is no intermarriage. In his studies of children in Jewish

mixed marriages, Mayer found that less than a quarter identified as Jewish and "virtually none married Jews themselves" (Mayer, 1989, p. 173). Moreover, as Medding, Tobin, Fishman, and Rimor found, in such intermarriages, "the likelihood of creating an unambiguous Jewish identity, should such indeed be the intention or the desire, is virtually nil." (Medding et. al., 1992).

The rising rate of intermarriage has created a major new challenge to the Jewish communal structure. One of the problems is that, although different groups may have policies for dealing with intermarriage, there is as yet no definitive communal-wide policy approach to dealing with it. To a large extent this is the result of the different ideological stances of the denominations toward intermarriage. Above and beyond that, however, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are no obvious means for coping with what is, simultaneously, a highly charged ideological issue and a basic and personal family issue.

Perhaps the major issue of contention is the direction of communal policy toward the intermarried. Briefly, many argue that, given the pervasiveness of intermarriage in American society, the most that can be hoped for is that the non-Jewish spouse will feel sufficiently welcome in Jewish institutional as well as social circles that, even if they do not convert, they will raise their children to identify as Jewish. To facilitate this, it is argued that the Jewish community must adopt policies of outreach directed at making the non-Jewish spouse as welcome and comfortable as possible. Ardent traditionalists argue that only a renewed commitment to Judaism and Jewish tradition

will fend off the consequences of intermarriage. The probabilities of that, as has been indicated, are negligible to nil. However, from a communal policy perspective, Bayme argues that the anticipated communal benefits from a new stance toward mixed marriage are rooted much more in wishful thinking than in sober and systematic analysis of social reality and, in contrast to those advocating a change in stance, he suggests that there is reason to argue that the intermarriage rate would go much higher were it not for the communal opposition (Marder, Miller, & Bayme, 1993, pp. 9-15). He and others (Wertheimer, Liebman, & Cohen, 1996) argue that there is a major segment of American Jews who may be categorized as moderately affiliated, for whom Jewish identity and identification are important and who respond to communal values and positions even though they are not intensively involved in the community in a formal manner either religiously or ethnically. It is those Jews to whom communal policy should be directed to strengthen their ties with the community, rather than to those who are beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community. In short, the issue of intermarriage and how to deal with it has not been resolved and remains a challenge to both communal workers, in terms of policy, and to social scientists, in terms of its ultimate significance and impact on the group.

With respect to Israel-related patterns, among the baby boomer respondents with extensive Jewish education (12 years or more), more than two-thirds (69.6%) visited Israel at least once, and almost half (47.6%) were there more than once. Among all American Jewish baby boomers, as was indicated above, more than three-fourths (75.3%) were never in

Israel, and only 12% were in Israel more than once. Similarly, among those with more than 12 years day school education, almost three quarters (74.1%) said that they feel "very attached" or "extremely attached" emotionally to Israel. Among those with 9-12 years of day school education, 40% also reported their close attachment to Israel. However, among all American Jewish baby boomers, as was indicated above, less than 30% (28.8%) said that they feel "very attached" or "extremely attached," and almost a quarter (24.2%) said they were "not attached." The remaining 47% said they were "somewhat attached" emotionally to Israel.

When it comes to *aliya* from the United States, all studies indicate that American immigrants, *olim*, arrive in Israel with more extensive Jewish education than is typical of the Jewish population in the United States. More than a third of the American *olim* had at least a day school education (Waxman, 1989; Waxman, 1995). Although the percentage of baby boomers who become *olim* is very small – since 1985, annual immigration of American Jews of all ages stands at about 2000 or less – the high level of Jewish education among those who do disproportionately depletes the ranks of American Jews with high levels of Jewish education, who are a small minority to begin with. This might serve as an argument against the *aliya* of highly educated and committed young American Jews. On the other hand, however, evidence indicates that those who do undertake *aliya* maintain strong ties with the American Jewish community and that they frequently serve as teachers and leaders for the American Jewish community even though they live in Israel (Waxman, 1989). Indeed, for some, their impact

on the community may be greater because of their *aliya.*

From their analysis of the 1990 NJPS data, Fishman and Goldstein concluded that, "The data show us the strong correlation of Jewish education and enhanced Jewish identification." They continue:

> Even after adjusting for denomination of Judaism in which a person was raised, extensive Jewish education is related to a greater ritual observance, greater likelihood of belonging to and attending synagogues, greater levels of voluntarism for Jewish causes, and greater chances of marrying a Jew and being opposed to intermarriage among one's children. Moreover, the associational effect of extensive formal Jewish education and heightened Jewish identification is more dramatic among younger American Jews, ages 18 to 44, than among older groups. Indeed, research which does not divide the group studied by age is likely to blur the strength of the association between extensive Jewish education and extensive Jewish identification.
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> (Fishman & Goldstein, 1993: 12)

Similarly, in his study of Jewish parents of young and teenage Jewish children, Steven Cohen's 1993 data indicated that, "The effects of Jewish [day school] education persist beyond marriage. It increases the chances that Jews will marry Jews; and, if they marry Jews (but not Gentiles), Jewish education elevates the likelihood that as adults they will be more involved in Jewish life" (Cohen, 1995: 92).

Our analysis of the baby boomers supports these findings which indicate that for baby boomers, day school education enhances Jewish identity and

identification. However, the fact that only about 10% received day school education suggests that a vast portion of the population is not affected by this factor. Hopefully, one of the tasks of this workshop will be to suggest ways for intensifying Jewish education among the overwhelming majority of American Jews because, as we have seen, Jewish education does matter.

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